

DAN FLAVIN

A RETROSPECTIVE

May 13–August 12, 2007



Dan Flavin (1933–1996) was one of the most innovative artists of the late twentieth century. For more than thirty years, he worked with mass-produced, commercially available fluorescent lights in 2-, 4-, 6-, and 8-foot lengths; circular fixtures; and a few basic colors (blue, green, pink, yellow, red, four whites, and ultraviolet). With this seemingly limited medium of mundane elements, he produced an oeuvre of extraordinary range and depth.

Flavin began exhibiting his lights in the early 1960s, a time when younger artists started to challenge the dominance of abstract expressionism and its emphasis on conveying emotion through the sensuous qualities of paint. Along with Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Carl Andre, Flavin proposed a new art of simple, systematic forms and industrial materials that integrated the surrounding architecture within the space of the artwork. He thus transformed both the material and the space around it, creating experiences of light and color that evoke a range of references and emotions.



icon I (the heart) (to the light of Sean McGovern which blesses everyone), 1961–62. Oil on cold gesso on Masonite and pine, and red fluorescent light. 29 × 25 1/8 × 4 5/8 in. (76.2 × 63.8 × 11.9 cm). Collection Stephen Flavin. Photo: Bill Jacobson, courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

Icons

From 1961 to 1964, Flavin completed a series of eight “icons” in his first use of electric light as a medium. He constructed boxes with monochromatic surfaces and then affixed fluorescent or incandescent lights to them. He meant the term *icon*, a reference to religious objects, ironically. As Flavin writes:

[M]y icons differ from a Byzantine Christ held in majesty; they are dumb—anonymous and inglorious. They’re as mute and undistinguished as the run of our architecture. My icons do not raise up the blessed savior in elaborate cathedrals, they are constructed concentrations celebrating barren rooms. They bring a limited light.



the diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi), 1963. Yellow fluorescent light. 8 ft. (244 cm) long. Dia Art Foundation. Photo: Billy Jim, courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

Fluorescent Lights

Flavin’s first work using a fluorescent light as its only element, *the diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)* (1963) is related to his earlier ironic-symbolic constructions; its gold light recalls the reflective gilt backgrounds of Byzantine icons. This work differs from Flavin’s earlier icons, however, in its “readymade,” store-bought quality. The commercial fixture is neither a traditional painting, nor a sculpture, nor a handcrafted object. It also differs from dada artist Marcel Duchamp’s readymades (mass-produced objects such as bicycle wheels that he presented as art) because the light had limitless potential to be extended and varied. This quality of infinite expansion, both literally in space and conceptually in Flavin’s artistic practice, more closely parallels the modernist *Endless Column* sculptures of Constantin Brancusi, to whom this work is dedicated.



pink out of a corner (to Jasper Johns). 1963. Pink fluorescent light, 8 ft. (244 cm) high. Collection Stephen Flavin. Photo: Billy Jim, courtesy Dia Art Foundation.



the nominal three (to William of Ockham). 1963. Cool white fluorescent light, 8 ft. (244 cm) high. Lannan Foundation. Photo: Billy Jim, courtesy Dia Art Foundation.



untitled (to Henri Matisse). 1964. Pink, yellow, blue, and green fluorescent light, 8 ft. (244 cm) high. Private collection, New York. Photo: Billy Jim, courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

The Green Gallery

Flavin's first exhibition of works made of unadorned fluorescent lights was held at the Green Gallery in New York in 1964 and is reassembled here. Flavin eliminated traditional framing devices and instead used the room's architecture as a reference, placing his work on the floor, the edges of walls, and in corners. *Pink out of a corner (to Jasper Johns)* (1963) defines the intersection of walls but also masks the receding darkness usually perceived in corners. As Flavin noted, "I knew the actual space of a room could be broken down and played with by planting illusions of real light, electric light, at crucial junctures in the room's composition."

Seriality, Repetition, and Scale

Dedicated to the fourteenth-century Franciscan theologian who argued that "entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily," this work from 1963 is at the crux of Flavin's practice. William of Ockham asserted that the simplest of competing theories is preferable to the more complex, and the work began in Flavin's sketches as a single, vertical white lamp. The final version, however, uses three sets of lights. He created a series rather than a consolidated whole, realizing the potential for endless extension and repetition inherent in his chosen medium—ideas he communicated here using a simple arithmetic progression. The installation of this work—mounted to the edges of the wall and resting on the floor—also conforms to the dimensions of any room, thus incorporating the architecture into the space of the art. The ideas of seriality, repetition, and scale in this work would influence artists of the 1960s and 70s.

Matisse and Light

This 1964 work dedicated to the great modern colorist Henri Matisse consists of Flavin's own primary colors of pink, yellow, blue, and green. Blended together, these colors complete the spectrum, emitting a bright white similar to Mediterranean sunlight. Throughout his career, Flavin explored the nuances of combining or isolating the different colors available to him, and he varied their intensity by changing the lengths and number of fixtures in an assemblage. While the work dedicated to Matisse uses four colors to make white, *in daylight and cool white (to Sol LeWitt)* (1964) is a more subtle juxtaposition, combining the "colors" of just two white lights.



untitled (to the "innovator" of Wheeling Peachblow), 1966–68. Daylight, yellow, and pink fluorescent light, 8 ft. (244 cm) square. Photo: Billy Jim, courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

Corners

Flavin had a career-long preoccupation with the corners of rooms. His concern echoes that of two influential Russian artists, Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich. The Russian constructivist Tatlin sought to engage real space with constructions of nontraditional, industrial materials. Malevich desired to create a new kind of icon in a nonobjective language of shape and color. Both ideas are evidenced in *monument 4 for those who have been killed in ambush (to P. K. who reminded me about death)* (1966). A memorial to those killed in the Vietnam War, the work forcefully juts into the space of the room while providing a powerful, bloodlike glow that complements Flavin's subject. Red fluorescent light, produced by coating the interior of the lamp with pigment, is the dimmest of Flavin's palette. In *untitled (to the "innovator" of Wheeling Peachblow)* (1966–68), a near-square format across a corner that Flavin used repeatedly, the blended pink and orange light (which mimics the color of early American glassware) washes out the corner of the wall and provides a lovely, colorful illusion.



"monument" 1 for V. Tatlin, 1964. Cool white fluorescent light, 8 ft. (244 cm) high. Collection Sonja Flavin. Photo: Billy Jim, courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

Monuments

Between 1964 and 1990, Flavin made fifty "monuments" dedicated to Vladimir Tatlin. Many of these works have a towerlike format that recalls Tatlin's ambitious plans for *Monument to the Third International* (1919–20), a 1,300-foot spiraling tower that was never built. Flavin stated:

My concern for the thought of Russian artist-designer Vladimir Tatlin was prompted by the man's frustrated, insistent attitude to attempt to combine artistry and engineering. The pseudomonuments, structural designs for clear but temporary cool white fluorescent lighting, were to honor the artist ironically.



untitled (to a man, George McGovern) 2, 1972. Warm white fluorescent light, 10 ft. (305 cm) high, 10 ft. (305 cm) wide. Dia Art Foundation. Photo: Cathy Carver, courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

Circular Fixtures

In 1972 Flavin introduced circular fixtures with various white lamps into his fluorescent system, leading to a new body of work. Two of these lights, one in cool white and the other in warm white, originally were installed in a room at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York for an exhibition that opened just a few days before the election in which the antiwar candidate George McGovern lost his bid for the presidency. Flavin had been actively involved in McGovern's campaign.



untitled (to Robert, Joe, and Michael). 1975–81. Pink and yellow fluorescent light. 8 ft. (244 cm) wide, in a corridor measuring 8 ft. (244 cm) high and 8 ft. (244 cm) wide; length variable. Installation view, Dan Flavin Art Institute, Bridgehampton, New York. Photo: Florian Holzherr, courtesy Dia Art Foundation.



untitled (to you, Heiner, with admiration and affection). 1973. Green fluorescent light. Modular units, 4 ft. (122 cm) high, 4 ft. (122 cm) wide, length variable. Dia Art Foundation. Photo: Florian Holzherr, courtesy Dia Art Foundation.



the diagonal of personal ecstasy. 1963. Pencil on paper mounted on cardboard, 3 x 5 in. (7.6 x 12.7 cm). Collection Stephen Flavin.

Installations

The site-specific nature of much of Flavin's oeuvre unfortunately means that some of his largest and most significant work no longer exists in its original form. One of these important installations has been reconstructed here. Commissioned by architects and designers Massimo and Lella Vignelli for the E. F. Hauserman Company showroom, the installation opened at the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles in March 1982. It involves three corridors, 8-by-8-foot constructed halls filled with light. Two of the corridors prevent passage, because the lamps fill the center space, while the other invites the viewer to walk through a hall dramatically lit with lamps placed diagonally on the walls and ceiling. Presenting a spectacular array of color, the installation also engages the viewer's memory since the colors change hues in relation to each other and when seen from different sides.

Barriers

One of Flavin's "barriers"—fencelike constructions that extend across a room and bar access to one side—this work from 1973 is aggressive in both structure and color. Green is the strongest fluorescent light and produces an odd optical effect. As one looks at the green lamps, their color seems to whiten, while any daylight or surrounding white light seems to become pink. Flavin dedicated the installation to his longtime supporter, the German art dealer Heiner Friedrich, who later became a founder of Dia Art Foundation.

Early Constructions, Drawings, and Prints

Drawings were important to Flavin and took many forms throughout his career. His drawings and constructions from the late 1950s and 60s show the artist experimenting with many strategies. As he developed his fluorescent light system, the drawings took more distinct forms. His plans for fluorescent light installations were made primarily with a sketchy, fluid line in black pen, often on notebook paper. They include notes about his ideas for works. Other drawings or diagrams were completed after the lights were made and are elegantly rendered on black paper or graph paper. Flavin never stopped drawing from direct observation as well. His portraits, landscapes, and sketches of sailboats are rendered quickly and spontaneously but with a range of carefully considered lines and marks that he had developed through years of drawing.

Related Events

CONVERSATIONS WITH ARTISTS

James Welling

Thursday, May 31, 7 p.m.

James Welling works within a wide range of photographic mediums in his exploration of the nature and boundaries of photography. In conjunction with the exhibition, Welling discusses his own work, his longtime interest in Flavin's art, and the relationship of Flavin's work to photography.

Bing Theater

Free; no reservations required.

Jennifer Steinkamp

Thursday, June 7, 7 p.m.

Installation artist Jennifer Steinkamp uses video and new media to explore ideas about space, motion, and perception. She discusses her work, including her own use of light in her art, as a complement to the exhibition.

Bing Theater

Free; no reservations required.

SPECIAL EXHIBITION LECTURE: FLUORESCENT LIGHT AS ART

Tiffany Bell

Sunday, July 15, 2 p.m.

Exhibition cocurator Tiffany Bell examines Flavin's development of fluorescent light as an artistic medium, as well as how he conformed his practice to contemporary conventions about art in the marketplace.

Bing Theater

Free; no reservations required.

GUIDED TOURS

Tuesdays and Saturdays, 2 p.m.

Free; no reservations required.

NEXGEN FAMILY SUNDAYS: LIGHT, COLOR, AND SPACE

June 3, 10, 17, and 24; 12:30–3:15 p.m.

Families can experiment with light, color, and space to create art installations.

Los Angeles Times Central Court

Free; no reservations required.

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Cover: *pink out of a corner (to Jasper Johns)*, 1963. Pink fluorescent light, 8 ft. (244 cm) high. Collection Stephen Flavin. Photo: Billy Jim, courtesy Dia Art Foundation. **Back:** *untitled (to you, Heiner, with admiration and affection)*, 1973. Green fluorescent light. Modular units, 4 ft. (122 cm) high, 4 ft. (122 cm) wide, length variable. Dia Art Foundation. Photo: Florian Holzherr, courtesy Dia Art Foundation.

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